

Youth Justice Board for England and Wales

Strategic plan 2021 - 2024

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Foreword

We live in challenging times. Yet, with every challenge there is an opportunity.

Numbers of children entering the youth justice system have reduced year upon year. This is a huge success, but there remains more work to do.

In our last strategic plan, we introduced our Child First principle. Since then, we have worked to understand what this means for the YJB and the youth justice system more broadly. With this strategic plan, we reaffirm our commitment to Child First. We want to see a Child First youth justice system. A system which supports children to become the best version of themselves. This is an ambitious goal and one which will take us beyond the lifespan of this plan.

Building a Child First system will take time and require a wide coalition of support. Collaboration is at the heart of what we do, and we will work with our partners across the system and beyond to push for positive change. We are also working to change perceptions of children within the justice system. We want to make sure that children receive the support they need to succeed. Often this support originates outside of the youth justice system. Bringing partners on board is essential. We all have a role to play in improving the outcomes for children and in doing so creating safer communities that can flourish.

Children have huge potential, and we want to harness that. We need to give children the opportunities to realise this potential and succeed. It is more important now than ever, to support our society to move past current challenges. If we allow children to succeed in life, we prevent offending. We will not only protect the public but will enable our society to thrive. This is not a baseless assertion. The evidence tells us that this is what works. This is what children tell us they both need and want. Children tell us that they want to be part of the solution, not the problem. We need to listen to children.

Children face many challenges, frequently not of their making. These challenges include poverty, discrimination, childhood trauma and special educational needs. All play a role in creating offending behaviour.

COVID-19 has amplified the challenges faced by children today. All children will have felt the impact; vulnerable children more than others. We need to recognise and adapt to meet these challenges and protect them. We do not want to see a rise in children entering the justice system and the good work of the past undone. Yet, unless we are proactive there is a real risk of this happening. We all need to work hard to address the difficulties children may face and enable their success.

We know relationships create positive change for children. Children need adults to believe in them and to see their potential; this helps them to be able to see it too. They look to us to tell them the kind of person that they are or who they might be. We can tell them that they are good, or they are bad; it is our choice. But we must accept the consequences of this choice.

This strategic plan is an invitation. We invite you to work with us and the many others to improve opportunities for children. To support children, realise their potential and in doing so, support our communities.

This strategic plan is also a thank you to the many others already working in this space. We look forward to continuing to work alongside you.

Keith Fraser
Chair of the Youth Justice Board

Introduction

As an independent public body appointed by the Secretary of State for Justice¹, we have a statutory responsibility to oversee the whole of the youth justice system. We have a unique role providing evidence-based advice and guidance on the provision of youth justice services. Our experience and expertise in areas that are vital for the effective delivery of youth justice is drawn from a consolidation of all of our statutory functions. In particular, our relationships with youth offending teams (YOTs), and the secure estate, and work with children's services throughout England and Wales, education, health, policing and academia enables us to provide advice through the way we:

- monitor the youth justice system to understand how it is operating
- distribute grants to local services
- support the provision of IT services for YOTs
- collate and publish information
- commission research to support practice development
- identify and share evidence-informed practice across the sector.

Our improved understanding of children in contact with the youth justice system has revealed that increasingly they have multiple needs and vulnerabilities. Despite the number of children within the system declining², we know that many more are on the cusp of contact with the system. We anticipate that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will only serve to inflate that number. We are therefore keen to do all that we can, alongside our partners, to ensure that as few children as possible actually end up within the youth justice system. This approach is also one we want to apply to the small, but concentrated, cohort of children who find themselves in a cycle of offending.

All children need the support of adults to fulfil their potential and to become the best version of themselves. This support is all the more important where children face particular challenges which, if unaddressed can lead to an increased likelihood of them being drawn into the youth justice system.

These challenges can be multiple and complex in nature. Children may be vulnerable due to health, including; mental health issues or through their family/care circumstances or homelessness. Children with special educational needs, again, may be more vulnerable and many children have experience as

¹ As established by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

² Youth Justice Board/Ministry of Justice. (2021) *Youth Justice Statistics 2019/20: England and Wales*. Available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2019-to-2020>

victims of crime³⁴. All these vulnerabilities can lead to children being exploited or exposed to negative influences, hindering their ability to thrive⁵.

In line with our Child First vision, the YJB wants to make sure that children are not unnecessarily criminalised as a result of their vulnerabilities and the challenges they face. From our work with partners across the youth justice sector and government, we know that there are many interventions in place. We want to use our statutory role to better join up these interventions and facilitate collaboration in a more holistic way and drive towards improving outcomes for children.

The devastation caused by the pandemic to children's lives will have long lasting consequences in many different areas. However, there is also untold damage and delay to various services that would support children and their needs, despite the tremendous efforts that have been made to continue. We know that there has also been a significant impact on the operation of the criminal justice system⁶. Together, these issues are a potential powder keg, and could risk progress made to date in diverting children from the youth justice system. This plan recognises that external or environmental factors have a bearing on our work and vision, and as such we have identified three strategic pillars that will help us work towards our vision:

1. An exemplary public sector organisation and employer

We will build the YJB to be the most effective public sector organisation and employer it can be. This is essential to delivering our vision. Through the pandemic, and beyond, we will focus our efforts on building our organisational capability and resilience to ensure that our staff are best equipped to deliver our vision for children.

2. Effectively deliver our unique statutory oversight function

Our statutory responsibility to oversee the operation of the youth justice system⁷ plays a huge part in our vision. We use the information we collect and share to report on the youth justice system's status. This has a vital role in making sure that children and the services they receive are on the right track and that when there are concerns, they are escalated as necessary. We are committed to

³ Ibid

⁴ For example, McAra, L. and McVie, S. (2010) 'Youth crime and justice: Key messages from the Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime', *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 10 (2), pp. 172-209. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1748895809360971>

⁵ Public Health England. (2019). *Collaborative approaches to preventing offending and re-offending in children (CAPRICORN)*. Public Health England. Available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-offending-and-re-offending-by-children>

⁶ Ministry of Justice. (2021). *Criminal Justice Statistics quarterly: September 2020*. Ministry of Justice. Available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/criminal-justice-system-statistics-quarterly-september-2020>

⁷ As set out in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998

enhancing this as needed to ensure that we always have a very current and real-time understanding of the youth justice landscape. Our administration and distribution of grants to those who provide these services is therefore even more valuable. Ensuring that we look towards improvement and innovation, we will strengthen the way we conduct our oversight of the youth justice system.

3. Drive system improvement

Our leadership and guidance, informed by our oversight, is fundamental to our strategy. The YJB's role in the youth justice landscape means that we play a pivotal role. We have committed to increasing this, so that we can provide sound and reliable leadership to the sector and strategic partners. We will as a result, be better placed to drive forward changes within the youth justice system, creating real improvements for children and enabling them to lead their best lives. We want to see a system that is informed by the most up-to-date, accessible evidence. This will be supported by a culture that promotes the participation of children.

What we do and what we stand for

In the pdf version of this report we include a diagram which shows the YJB's vision and mission statement. It also shows the three strategic pillars that will help the YJB to achieve its vision. These are all underpinned by the child first guiding principle and YJB values.

Under "Vision for a child first youth justice", it states "A youth justice system that sees children as children, treats them fairly and helps them to build on their strengths so they can make a constructive contribution to society. This will prevent offending and create safer communities with fewer victims". Under "Mission statement", it states "The Youth Justice Board is the only statutory body to have oversight of the entire youth justice system. We provide independent, evidence-based advice and leadership to drive improvements that increase children's positive outcomes and prevent offending".

Pillar one "An exemplary public sector organisation and employer", states that "Through clear leadership, we empower our people to intelligently use our resource and operate as an exemplary public sector organisation & employer".

Pillar two "Unique oversight function", states that "Our unique statutory oversight function enables our effective monitoring of the operation of the youth justice system".

Pillar three "Drive system improvement", states that "The leadership and guidance we provide to our partners helps drive system improvement for children and achieve better outcomes".

Our strategic approach and central guiding principle: Child First

The YJB's vision is for a youth justice system that treats children as children. This vision lies at the heart of who we are and what we stand for as an organisation. As adults, we have a moral responsibility to protect children in our society from all harms that might hinder their growth and their ability to realise their potential. If we fail in this responsibility, children will almost inevitably fail to thrive. In some cases, they will be drawn towards negative influences and behaviours to feel self-worth and value. In such circumstances, contact with the youth justice system, the subsequent impact upon their sense of self, and the stigmatisation that follows will all hinder their ability to constructively move forwards. The YJB wants to break this cycle.

We want to make sure that wherever possible, children are prevented from having contact with the youth justice system. In cases where contact is unavoidable, any interventions that are deployed create constructive opportunities for children to realise their potential. This will benefit both the child as an individual, and society. Evidence tells us that this works in preventing offending and reoffending⁸. This is our core principle and what we regard as Child First. The YJB wants to ensure that the whole youth justice sector can respond to children's differing levels of vulnerability and need to ensure less contact occurs with the system. Our vision calls for a systemic response to meet this challenge, where the YJB, and all youth justice services operate according to the following Child First approach:

1. Prioritise the best interests of children and recognising their particular needs, capacities, rights and potential. All work is child-focused, developmentally informed, acknowledges structural barriers and meets responsibilities towards children.
2. Promote children's individual strengths and capacities to develop their pro-social identity for sustainable desistance, leading to safer communities and fewer victims. All work is constructive and future-focused, built on supportive relationships that empower children to fulfil their potential and make positive contributions to society.
3. Encourage children's active participation, engagement and wider social inclusion. All work is a meaningful collaboration with children and their carers.
4. Promote a childhood removed from the justice system, using pre-emptive prevention, diversion and minimal intervention. All work minimises criminogenic stigma from contact with the system.

⁸ For example, in relation to resettlement from custody, see <http://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/>

Child First recognises children according to their age, development, maturation and their potential as they grow into adulthood. Previously, perspectives of children's involvement in the youth justice system focused on managing a child's offending behaviour and the risks they were considered to pose. However, in recent years, evidence has demonstrated that effective prevention⁹ is driven by focusing on children's needs; identifying their strengths and creating opportunities that realise their potential. Evidence also tells us that contact with the youth justice system can increase the likelihood of children reoffending¹⁰. This means that we should prevent as many children as possible from coming into contact with the system. It also means that we need to carefully consider how we prevent any longer-term damage caused to children who are in contact with the system. This plan introduces two changes to how we define Child First. The first explicitly recognises the responsibilities adults have towards children. The second acknowledges the structural inequalities that many children face, and which contribute to disproportionality within the youth justice system.

The YJB is aware of many examples of good practice across youth justice partners. Through our work we will continue to encourage creativity and innovation, developing the potential in people, systems, processes and practice. We will share what we know in the most accessible way, so that our sector partners can be at the forefront of working effectively with children. The way we target our funding is critical to this approach. However, we know that this alone is not enough – the right systems must be in place to enable and support this approach and, opportunities must exist for children to lead positive and constructive lives. Children become drawn into behaviours that lead them into contact with the youth justice system for a range of reasons, many of them linked to failures to ensure their safety and well-being. As such, the YJB is committed to reaching out to those beyond the criminal justice system, and to ensure that this approach is undertaken before children are involved in the conveyor belt of stigmatisation that may then follow. Treating children in a holistic way, responding to their specific needs and working constructively to help them make positive contributions to society can potentially result in fewer children involved in the justice system. It will also mean that for those children who do end up in the criminal justice system, responding to their specific needs and vulnerabilities may lead them to achieving sustained desistance.

A Child First approach is needed now, more than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic has created immediate challenges for many children which have needed an immediate response. There are also many legacy issues arising which will need to be addressed as we recover from the aftermath of this unprecedented situation. As a result, children have been exposed to further hardships, often cumulative in their impact. Some examples include, but are not limited to, effects on their physical and mental health; increased poverty and economic and social deprivation; loneliness and a loss of support networks; the exacerbation of harms experienced through abuse, grooming and exploitation. We know this has increased the challenges faced by children and

⁹ See for example, Case, S., & Haines, K. (2014). 'Children First, Offenders Second Positive Promotion: Reframing the Prevention Debate'. *Youth Justice*, 15 (3), pp226-239. [DOI: 10.1177/1473225414563154](https://doi.org/10.1177/1473225414563154)

¹⁰ Petrosino, A., Turpin-Petrosino, C., & Guckenburg, S. (2010). 'Formal system processing of juveniles: Effects on delinquency.' *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 1, pp 3-80. [DOI: 10.4073/csr.2010.1](https://doi.org/10.4073/csr.2010.1)

consequently their vulnerabilities. We also know that this has meant that some children have experienced reduced opportunities. And for some children, for example those from Black and Minority Ethnic communities, the impact of loss has been comparatively greater.

Our commitment to preventing children from offending, and our work with partners to strive for this aspiration, will help create safer communities and fewer victims. We are also committed to making sure we influence and improve systemic processes so that all children are treated fairly and equally. We want to see a youth justice system where children are not disadvantaged as a result of their ethnic background, learning ability, sexual orientation or other characteristics that might attract deliberately distinctive treatment.

We will use our statutory responsibilities to stand by and demonstrate the application of our core principle and ensure that at every opportunity, we influence and bring improved outcomes for children. Our independent role in the youth justice landscape provides the YJB with the ability to set out trustworthy, evidence-based advice. We will maximise all possible opportunities to ensure children are placed at the heart of any decisions around system improvements and will be centred on their best interests. The YJB is a leading voice in youth justice matters – our insights and expertise will enable the advice we provide to increase the chances for positive outcomes for children, and in turn prevent offending.

We know this is ambitious – and we know that it may be more difficult to achieve in this current challenging environment. However, we are optimistic. We know we will need to be realistic and so we will carefully examine how we can effectively work internally, and with our partners, to help realise our aspirations.

Our strategic pillars

Strategic pillar one

Through clear leadership, we empower our people to intelligently use our resource and operate as an exemplary public sector organisation and employer.

Priority one

Invest in our staff to encourage excellent behaviours and outstanding leadership.

Our people are our greatest asset towards achieving our vision. Investment in their continual development is crucial to our success. We will equip staff at all levels to lead, inspire, motivate, and successfully engage them with the YJB's vision and mission. We will nurture an open, inclusive and evidence-led, environment.

We will prioritise the development of key skills including:

- working collaboratively
- communicating and influencing
- effective stakeholder management
- critical thinking
- effective decision-making.

We will identify, promote and reward outstanding behaviours in a workplace where all our people thrive and can be themselves, and feel proud to work for the YJB.

Priority two

Develop a resilient organisation.

The YJB has experienced significant change over recent years, responding to organisational, governmental, sector-focused, and wider environmental needs. The success of our vision and objectives depends on and is driven by our staff and their ability to work in a challenging environment. To continue to be effective, we will build on our workforce resilience and the YJB's ability to deliver through future challenges. We have a strategy to implement this alongside supporting the professional development of our staff and the youth justice sector. As a learning organisation, we will focus on creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge to encourage innovative thinking and will adapt to reflect new knowledge and insights.

Priority three

Use our resources effectively, removing bureaucracy and enabling innovation.

To achieve our aim of being an exemplary public sector organisation, we will make the best use of the tools, systems and structures available to us. Sound

financial and governance structures are critical to our role in administering the core grant to youth offending teams (YOTs) and grants to our pathfinder projects, as is our compliance with principles of managing public resources. We undertook a critical re-structure in 2018 and a review of our ICT systems. We would like to refine and enhance our existing processes and control mechanisms to help the YJB operate in the most effective way and meet its statutory obligations. This will enable us to maintain our journey of continuous improvement.

We will continue to anticipate, review and respond to strategic and operational risks, and opportunities, both internal and external. The findings of our audits and triennial review will be used to enhance the checks of our financial management and governance systems. We will learn from the good practice of other organisations and also develop and share our own best practice.

Strategic pillar two

Our unique statutory oversight function enables our effective monitoring of the operation of the youth justice system.

Priority one

Strengthen and enhance our oversight of the youth justice system.

Oversight and monitoring of the youth justice system is one of our statutory functions. We work closely with partners, including YOTs, to gather, analyse and use the information we receive to bring real change to the lives of children. Information from across our partnership arrangements is essential to ensuring that the YJB provides evidence-based advice and information to our partners. This will in turn ensure that greater collaboration is focused on improvements that can be made for children.

We will expand our intelligence, and our partnerships. We will refine the way we analyse and act upon the oversight information we gather. This will help us to consider the best course of action that will change the system and improve children's lives across the youth justice system and beyond. We recognise that there is not a discrete cohort of children within the youth justice system. Children in this group often have multiple and complex vulnerabilities and needs. Only by working collaboratively with others will we be able to appropriately address this, and prevent children's contact (and in some cases, repeated contact) with the justice system. Our approach aims to address areas of commonality across the broader landscape, such as how to tackle the issues experienced by groups of children over-represented within the system. We will work with our partners to focus on preventing children entering the youth justice system in the first place.

Priority two

Effectively distribute grants to improve outcomes for children and their communities.

The distribution of the core YOT grant is another of our statutory functions. The smart allocation of our funding is an essential part of the way in which we support our YOT partners.

Our administration of the core annual grant has been honed and refined so that we are confident in our financial management of this function. In addition, we provide additional targeted funding focused on specific improvement activity for YOTs. We will continue to support pathfinders and evaluate the benefit of this approach to inform future funding arrangements.

Innovation and creativity are important factors for the distribution of these funds. With careful scrutiny, we will ensure that the way we target our funding works towards fulfilling our broader objective of ensuring a rights-based and equitable treatment of children.

Strategic pillar three

The leadership and guidance we provide to our partners helps drive system improvement for children and achieve better outcomes.

Priority one

Drive system improvements that treat children as children.

Our ambition is to operate in a Child First system. We recognise that this is a long-term goal which will extend beyond the lifespan of this plan – however, it is at the heart of who we are. We will focus our efforts on improving existing systems and influencing policy and practice at this current time.

Our work is directly informed by an evidence base which sees a strengths-based approach as being most effective in supporting the best outcomes for children and preventing offending and reoffending¹¹. Children in contact with the justice system have untapped potential which could benefit society, particularly as we recover from the effects of the 2020-21 COVID-19 pandemic. We will convey what the Child First evidence base looks like in practice and will work with sector partners and academics to develop this picture. Our understanding will support Ministers and policy makers to build systems aimed at delivering better outcomes for children. We will continue to provide guidance on national standards and develop case management operational guidance for the sector. We will use every opportunity to influence others to ensure that children's needs are at the front and centre of system improvement.

Priority two

Promote a holistic approach to address challenges facing children in contact with the youth justice system.

The experiences of children, and the value of their voices to our work is never under-estimated. Children's direct experiences, and our examination of their treatment, has increased our understanding of our evidence base. We now better understand that children's needs are not uniquely linked to the justice system. Children have education, health, family/care needs which are all tied to

¹¹ See, for example, <http://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/>, and Case, S., & Haines, K. (2014). 'Children First, Offenders Second Positive Promotion: Reframing the Prevention Debate'. *Youth Justice*, 15 (3), pp226-239. DOI: [10.1177/1473225414563154](https://doi.org/10.1177/1473225414563154)

their propensity to turn towards negative behaviours. We recognise that a discrete justice response is not the most effective approach to take, but that children need a holistic approach to help prevent contact with the justice system, and to prevent reoffending. Our commitment to convey what Child First looks like in practice will ensure that our work with partners highlights the importance of this approach and the increasing demand for joined-up responses.

This will help us to collaboratively respond to the challenges children face and ensure children are provided with better outcomes. In future, we will seize the opportunity to increase our work with children and enhance our understanding. We will share our learning with our partners and encourage them to seek the input of children with lived experience where possible. We hope this will produce more meaningful, results-driven outcomes for children.

Priority three

Maximise opportunities for improvements for children.

Our statutory functions enable us to play a vital role in identifying innovation and advising decision makers. Our working relationships with partners, the information and intelligence that flows into the organisation and our utilisation of these statutory levers all help to promote our role in the youth justice landscape.

We will maximise our spheres of influence and the intelligence we gather through our oversight function. This will help us to effect true system change and move closer to a Child First justice system. We will continue with our projects which support this and review them to ensure that their application is smart and delivers the results we strive for, with the greatest impact.

Priority four

Promote sector-led practice development and strengthen ways to disseminate what is known about working with children across the youth justice sector and beyond.

We recognise that the sector is best placed to develop the potential in people, systems, processes and practice, so a child's experience of the system is the best it can be. We see it as part of our role to provide our sector partners with the most up-to-date and accessible evidence of effective ways of working. We will work towards an approach that is open, innovative and collaborative, and actively seeks learning and expertise across all partners – this includes incorporating the voice and experiences of children and their supporters.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant challenges to children, and wider society, including the response from the youth justice system. We recognise that we will face a range of issues as a legacy of the pandemic. As we collectively recover from this unique set of circumstances, we will share our learning widely, continuing to develop enhanced dissemination practices through all the tools and channels we have available to us. Our dissemination of good practice provides invaluable support to the sector as it adapts to and meets these challenges.